



Duncan, A. (2018). *How schools work: An inside account of failure and success from one of the nation's longest-serving secretaries of education*. Simon and Schuster.

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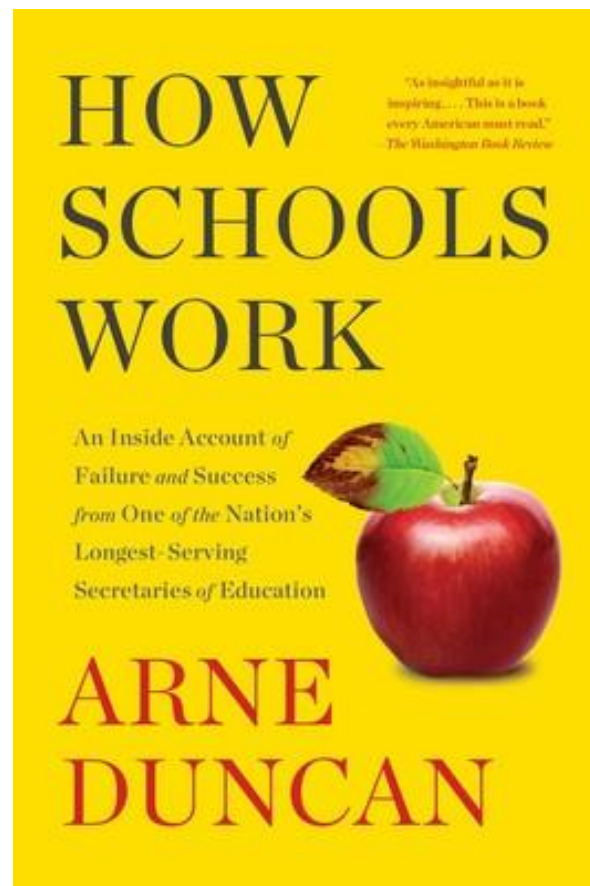
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**Reviewed by Sherman Dorn
Arizona State University
United States**

Arne Duncan begins his memoir with a broad thesis: “Education runs on lies” (p. 1). By this claim, he means that schools promote and confer diplomas on students who cannot read fluently. He means that school administrators avoid distinguishing good from bad teachers. Ultimately, he argues that despite claims to the contrary, our society does not pay honest attention to the needs of either teachers or children.

Duncan’s memoir roughly follows a chronology running from his early adulthood to his post-Obama job. He describes his career in education generously, from his tutoring children in his mother’s after-school center to running Chicago’s public schools and six years of service as the federal Secretary of Education under Barack Obama, and finally to his current role managing Chicago CRED for the Emerson Collective.

The peripatetic nature of many career journeys often makes a coherent argument difficult to embed in a memoir, and Duncan’s string of jobs does not lend itself to a strong



thematic story. He tries to make his argument along the way, with a mix of anecdote and sweeping polemic. There is the curmudgeonly Chicago principal Chester Herberts becoming a convert to the After School Matters program (pp. 37-39), and there is Duncan's seeing John Easton's predictive model of high school graduation as a basis for a range of interventions (pp. 76-79). There is his bus trip to the U.S.-Mexico border with American-born children who crossed the border every day from Chihuahua to attend school in Columbus, New Mexico (pp. 113-119), and there is his conversation with Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander, when Duncan learned that Alexander would not support Race to the Top's curriculum standards (pp. 145-147). Did he learn different dimensions of the lie as his career progressed, or better ways to improve schools? We never learn an answer. The book struggles with the attempt to manage both chronology and a broader argument. In the end, it is only partially successful at either describing Duncan's accomplishments and struggles or his broader claim about American education.

There is a serious case to be made that the woes of American education are the result of a shallow commitment to children and their caregivers. Until well after World War II, education was funded primarily by counties or cities. Local funding often was tight with schools dependent on both the wealth of individual communities and the community's willingness to tax themselves. That same dynamic is now evident in the decade since the Great Recession in entire states such as Kansas and Arizona, where both state resources and tax rates declined.

An argument along the line of long-term stinginess with only lip-service paid to children's welfare could be supported with many examples from Duncan's career, and he begins to make the case in the chapter about teacher evaluations, but only commits to it fully when he discusses gun violence at the end of the book. That chapter is specific,

passionate, and turns on the recent activism of young people in Parkland, Florida, and in Chicago.

Duncan complicates his argument by wrapping it in the vague term "lie." There is a special challenge of making a claim about lies in education: the implicit claim that if you tell the truth, the system will change. But Duncan's memoir is less about truth-telling than taking bold action, with an equally bold faith that taking action is the right thing. Building, acting, changing comprise the actual career that Duncan pursued. Even when he discusses his trust in researchers, e.g., the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, it is in the context of what a single conversation with the consortium's executive director John Easton prompted Duncan to decide as the Chicago schools CEO.

When it comes to his portrayal of his career, he is not persuasive. Part of the weakness is that Duncan was less than forthcoming in the book. Others have covered the contrast between Duncan's gushing narrative about his accomplishments and evidence of minimal success of his days before becoming Secretary of Education (Pallas, 2018) as well as his unwillingness to consider policy-making errors while serving as Secretary (Hess, 2018). Unnecessary fibs pop up on occasion, such as his claim that in late 2008, he did not know he was under serious consideration to be Secretary in the Obama administration, even while he must have undergone vetting for a Cabinet position. These little lies of his own, as well as the larger holes in his narrative, undermine his claim to be on the side of an unvarnished truth in education.

Perhaps the biggest falsehood in Duncan's memoir is his claim to stand outside politics, pleading repeatedly, "I'm not a politician" (p. 224). The most generous reading of Duncan's sentiment is that he wished to stand outside partisan divides. But at face value, his claim to be acting outside politics is belied by his own

actions as Secretary of Education. As the head of the federal Department of Education, he cultivated a broad network of reformers active in education politics, including hiring several as his deputies. Throughout the memoir, Duncan implies that politics are dirty and should be separate from schooling. But one cannot seriously regard education as both a right of and preparation for citizenship without acknowledging that there is a politics of education.

In his overall claim that “education runs on lies,” Duncan is confusing systemic failure with falsehood, or maybe lies and self-delusion. Perhaps this is merely by

comparison; in the age of Trump, it is hard to compete with the president’s lies. Yet Duncan’s memoir makes this claim even harder to accept by building the case around his personal commitment to children. He would have had more success building a more cohesive argument around a description of the ways we delude ourselves or perhaps by offering serious reflection about his career.

In the end, one suspects that one of the people deluded by the system Arne Duncan sees may have been Secretary Duncan. I am persuaded that Duncan is completely earnest if less than candid, including with himself.


About the Reviewer

Sherman Dorn is a professor of education and Director of the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. He is the author of *Creating the Dropout* (1996) and *Accountability Frankenstein* (2007) and coeditor of *Schools as Imagined Communities* (2006) and *Education Reform in Florida* (2007). He can be followed on Twitter, @shermadorn, and his irregular newsletter is available at <https://t.co/naVvM7M38s>



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